

Women and Leadership Research Report

Executive summary

Women often take the lead and initiate change in their own local communities yet they remain under-represented in most areas of decision-making. This document summarises findings from a small-scale study, commissioned by Engender, to look at two main questions:

- Why do women seem to shy away from taking on recognised leadership and decision-making roles when they are very active at a community level often using leadership skills?
- How do we train and support women to own and recognise their leadership skills and then take on and apply them to recognised leadership/ decision making roles?

Research Aims

These were to:

1. Undertake a limited review of the literature about women and leadership focusing on
 - Theories of leadership and how they impact on women
 - Women in representative and democratic politics
 - Barriers to leadership for women in politics, in management and other areas involving leadership and decision-making
2. Look at the attitudes of women towards leadership issues
3. Provide examples of practical approaches that are working in training women in leadership roles
4. Make recommendations for Engender and others about how to support more women to take on leadership roles

Research method

A limited review of the literature was undertaken and themes drawn out. This partly informed the devising of a questionnaire looking at attitudes of women towards leadership issues. The questionnaire was sent to organisations actively trying to encourage women into leadership roles in all aspects of decision-making - not just the formal political arena. Contact was made, through e-mail, with projects in the UK and other parts of the world. Projects were contacted if they offered any kind of leadership training including community or youth leadership, active citizenship as well as women focused training.

Trainers within those organisations were asked to complete the questionnaire. The questionnaire consisted of two parts. The first part asked trainers what they thought the attitudes were of the women they trained towards leadership issues. This used a scale devised to measure attitudes. The second part focused on how organisations trained people in leadership skills and related areas and what they thought would encourage women into leadership positions. These questions were of a qualitative nature.

Key findings from the literature review

Theories of leadership and how they impact on women

1. Leadership theories now focus on leadership style. There are different leadership styles and the appropriateness and effectiveness of a particular style

depends on the situation. There is no conclusive evidence of a woman's style per se though women do:

- seem better able to work together across differences to achieve a common goal
 - tend to have better communication skills
 - tend to more readily adopt collaborative and consensual leadership styles than other styles
2. How effective women are as leaders may have more to do with their gender than their actual abilities and performance with men and women both generally reacting more negatively to women as leaders.
 3. Women are more readily accepted as leaders in some cultures than others.

Women in representative and democratic politics

1. Women are active in participatory democracy often taking on leadership roles.
2. Women sometimes actively chose not to be involved in institutionalised power structures because they feel they can better use their energies on the outside and retain their integrity as well have flexibility to deal with caring responsibilities.
3. Where there is full support for the caring responsibilities of women they are more likely to be involved in formal decision - making and leadership positions though often channelled into stereotypical areas.
4. Women have a better chance of making a difference where there is support from inside the organisation and from the outside.

Barriers to leadership for women in politics, in management and other areas involving leadership and decision-making

1. Women continue to face institutional and individual discrimination.
2. Many women have low aspirations and low levels of self confidence.
3. Women's perceptions of careers seem to differ from men with many women not actively planning a career. Women often seek out other benefits from what they do ahead of climbing the ladder such as personal challenges and fulfilment.
4. Achieving a balance between family and other commitments is important to many women.
5. Family conflict and responsibilities do take their toll for many but not all women. Where women succeed, support from the home is crucial particularly when they have children.
6. Women tend to come to leadership and decision making roles later in life than men partly because of interrupted career patterns.

Discussion

The literature suggests that there are a range of reasons why women are not to be found in equal part in formal decision-making and leadership positions. Women continue to face a range of barriers from the outside such as institutionalised and individual discrimination along with the reality that they often have the major responsibility for family life. Women tend to want balance in their lives and will forfeit a career to achieve that. There are also a range of internal factors such as confidence levels and perceptions of what can be achieved that effect the likelihood of women seeking to become leaders, managers and decision makers beyond the informal spheres.

In addition, male dominated archetypes of what is an acceptable leadership style still prevail. Whilst there are no substantive differences between men and women in terms of style, there are perceptions of differences. This in part may arise from the fact that women have a tendency to use “soft skills” such as communication skills and favour a more democratic leadership style. Such an approach is not yet valued to the same extent as the image of a strong, visionary (usually male) leader out in front. Many men and women alike still seem to work with a male definition of leadership. So, in part of the reason for women not being found in more formal leadership positions is because they don’t see themselves as leaders or want to be leaders. Leadership remains defined in male terms.

Key findings from the questionnaire survey

Responses were received from sixteen organisations. The majority of these were operating in the voluntary sector.

Attitudes to leadership

Despite the fact that trainers in the survey clearly agreed that women have leadership skills and use these skills in many community based activities they do not think that women have confidence in themselves as leaders or that they recognise their skills as leadership skills. They also think that women are reluctant to take on recognised leadership and decision-making roles because of pressures to juggle other areas of life and concerns such roles will take over their lives. The survey would seem to support a view that women have, but do not recognise their leadership skills. It is not clear from the survey whether women have particular difficulties with the concept of leadership itself.

Training approaches

Half the respondents delivered some training specifically in leadership skills for women but most also undertook other training too. Women made up sixty percent or more of those being trained for all except three organisations.

Twelve organisations actively looked at the impact of some aspect of discrimination on who holds power in their training programmes but only six dealt with discrimination and its impact in a more comprehensive manner.

A range of skills were either reinforced or developed within the programmes of organisations surveyed including:

Speaking in public, committee skills, networking, debating, researching, media skills, advocacy, lobbying, campaigning, engaging with policy formers, fundraising, strategic planning, governance, management, communication, assertiveness, motivation, influencing, self development, coaching and mentoring, creativity and vision building.

How to encourage and support women into leadership positions

Various suggestions were made about how to encourage more women to take on officially recognised leadership and decision-making roles. The most popular call was for more training. Other suggestions included:

- Mentoring
- Asking women local councillors, MSP’s and MP’s etc. to share their experiences as women in leadership positions.
- Dispelling the myths about what makes a good leader and getting women in touch with their visions of how the world could be different if they made more of an impact.

- Being creative about the ways in which people can lead with ideas as well as lead projects.
- Looking at the wider changes needed such as more family friendly working practices and the legislation governing elections.

Discussion

This is a small-scale study, so there has to be some caution in generalising the findings. Resources meant that trainers were contacted rather than views being sought directly from women themselves.

Training is identified by those surveyed as a way of encouraging women into leadership roles. In the light of the views expressed through the survey that women lack confidence in them as leaders and fail to recognise their leadership skills, it would seem important to have women only training in this field.

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Leadership training is not likely to have immediate effects at the top levels of the political system, nor is it likely to bring a quick cure. It is likely to have its greatest impact on civil society, which is increasingly being recognised as important to the functioning of democracy.

In providing training, terminology may be important in encouraging women to come forward. If, as seems the case from this study, women do not recognise their skills and may be unsure about themselves as leaders, then approaches that focus on skills for public life and participation rather than directly talking about politics and leadership are worth considering.

Conclusions

The questions asked at the beginning were:

- Why do women shy away from leadership roles when they seem to have the skills to lead?
- What can be done to support women into leadership positions?

The survey suggests that lack of confidence in their skills and abilities as leaders and failure to recognise those skills seems to be one part of the explanation as well as the reality that many women juggle with family responsibilities and fear leadership roles taking over their lives. These factors are also identified in the literature along with other barriers such as discrimination direct and indirect. Women sometimes actively decide to put their energies into grass roots activities as they feel they can be more effective at that level. Given the continued perceptions of a leader as being strong, visionary and male in this culture, such a view may be a realistic one.

In terms of what can be done to support women into leadership positions:

- There is a role for training programmes that support women in identifying their leadership skills and building up confidence in their abilities.
- Issues of power and discrimination need to be examined in any training along with looking at different approaches to leadership and what style is appropriate when and what women are comfortable with.
- Given the importance for many women of keeping a balance, training needs to look holistically at women lives, recognising that other parts of women's lives impact on what they do.

- The approach that may work best in terms of encouraging women working within their communities to take on decision making, influencing and leadership roles in Scotland is to focus on training for participation/ public life skills rather than leadership training itself.
- It is likely that continued training and support mechanisms would be of benefit to many women. Once women do take on leadership roles, confidence can be easily eroded in the face of insidious indirect discrimination, so training for women already in leadership positions is to be recommended. This should focus more directly on leadership skills and dilemmas.
- Myths and stereotypes also need to be challenged and women in leadership positions need to be encouraged to share their experiences.
- There is also a role for mentoring schemes where women can further share their experiences and develop their skills. As a diverse but underrepresented group, women need to be supported to recognise, own and use their skills at all levels not just within their immediate communities.

We need a strong participatory democracy to direct and promote issues that effect women but we equally need women in representative democracy and in influential positions to take make change possible. Supporting women into leadership positions at every level has to be a priority both in terms of social justice and because there are specific issues for women that will not be addressed if the status quo remains. For an organisation like Engender, it may best use its skills and resources in supporting women into leadership positions within participatory democracy as well as continuing to lobby for more women within representative democracy. Within representative democracy, the debate needs to be around how to support and further develop skills for women already in decision –making positions.

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